

# THE INFLUENCE OF GENERATIONAL SHIFTS

Executive Development

The Influence of Generational Shifts  
That Inhibit Effective Communications

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### Abstract

The Irving Fire Department has undergone significant generational shifts whose influence has inhibited effective communications, thus affecting department responses to address issues in a timely manner. This study was conducted to identify those elements of generational norms and practices that inhibit department communications.

Descriptive research methods were utilized to identify generational shifts that have occurred in the department, the elements of generational shifts affecting communications, and the effect of generational norms and member's practices on effective communication.

Questionnaires, observations, and personal interviews were utilized to determine that fundamental personality, core value, and work ethic differences inhibit communication and delay department responses. Awareness, education, openness, and establishing a work environment fostering respect and understanding will be essential to overcoming communication obstacles.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	Page 2.
Table of Contents .....	Page 3.
Introduction .....	Page 4.
Background and Significance .....	Page 5.
Literature Review .....	Page 9.
Procedure .....	Page 18.
Results .....	Page 20.
Discussion .....	Page 26.
Recommendations .....	Page 29.
Reference List .....	Page 31.

## Appendices

Appendix A: Generational Studies Questionnaire .....	Page 33.
Appendix B: Generational Studies Observation Form .....	Page 35.
Appendix C: Generational Studies Interview Questions .....	Page 36.

## The Influence of Generational Shifts That Inhibit Effective Communication

### Introduction

Considering the numerous barriers to personal communication, in particular those associated with generational differences in experience, learning, expectations and motivation, it is important to realize there are often difficulties with people understanding one another. Miscommunication resulting in confusion and conflict, often arises when personnel of different generations work together (Grant, Clantis, Hyatt, & Wachtman, 2007).

The Irving Fire Department (IFD) is no less susceptible to communication difficulties influenced by generational differences than any other dynamic corporation. Most organization leadership or management positions are still dominated by Baby Boomers, but with the new diversity of ages entering the work force conflicting needs are multiplying (Wendover, 2007). The tensions, challenges, and opportunities of generational diversities have revealed a wide spread misunderstanding and resentment between older, middle age, and younger employees. It is a growing and problematic situation that will not auto-correct or simply disappear as so many organizations vehemently hope (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000).

Without intervention, communications may suffer from physical, perceptual, emotional and cultural barriers. Buzz-words and jargon may replace clear and concise verbalization further confusing members not familiar with generational expressions. Members may also engage in meaningless rituals or work activities, and manipulative games to avoid interpersonal contact (Garner, 2007). An unfortunate result of these barriers to communications is an inability to address department issues in a timely manner.

Through sustained periods of growth, the addition of highly technical services, more stringent hiring practices, management changes, and supplemental retirement options, the demographics of IFD personnel has changed dramatically. Significant generational shifts have

also occurred. The problem this research examines is the influence of generational shifts that inhibit effective communications between members of the IFD, thus affecting department responses to address issues in a timely manner.

To accurately assess the nature of this influence an understanding of each generation's norms and communicative style is essential. The purpose of this research is to identify elements of generational norms and practices that inhibit effective communications.

This study uses the descriptive method to answer the following research questions: (a) what are the generational shifts that exist in the IFD, (b) what are the elements of generational shifts affecting communication in the IFD, (c) what negative effect do generational norms have on effective communication, and (d) how do department members' practices negatively impact their communication?

### Background and Significance

The Irving Fire Department (IFD) was first organized as a single volunteer company in 1925 after the burning of the city's only schoolhouse. At this time Irving was a small community of less than 1000 citizens and incorporated less than a square mile of land. The volunteers were mostly of the same age and economic status, and generally held the shared values and concerns of a new farm community. In the early 1940's two additional apparatus were purchased to meet the growing needs of Irving's bustling community, however, the department operated without significant change until the mid 1950's when the first full-time employees were hired ("History of", n.d.).

Through the mid to late 1950's the transition from a volunteer to a paid department initiated a period of consistent growth. During the next decade the city added four new stations and sixty paid personnel. Most command and station officer positions were filled by older and more experienced volunteers, or were hired away from other paid departments in larger urban areas. New members were recruited from local and surrounding communities and other fire

departments (“History of”, n.d.). This new era of growth marked the beginning of the generational shifts the IFD would experience into the late 1990’s.

Throughout the 1960’s as attrition depleted the ranks of veteran fire fighters, a new breed of recruits were filling the positions. They were born in the early to mid forties, most had high school educations or a General Equivalency Diploma (GED), and many had served in the armed forces. This expanding new workforce had little in common with the established membership, and management did not have the expertise to assimilate old and new personnel into a cohesive group. As a result, interpersonal communications and understanding were seriously strained.

During this period, the department systematically reorganized into a paramilitary organization. Structure and discipline eventually replaced the casual environment of a community fire service. A hard line developed between most officers and subordinates, and organizational activities were performed without question. As job security became a priority issue, discussion of working conditions, policies and operational procedures became guarded. The perception was that city officials would view any verbalization of dissatisfaction as criticism of administrative policy, and would result in severe punishment or termination. The situation had a devastating effect on communications and the department’s ability to address personnel issues (L. D. Erwin, personal communication, May 22, 2007).

In 1972 fire fighters struggled to set aside personal preferences, and present a united position to city officials on unacceptable working conditions and lack of benefits. Lengthy negotiations were unproductive and disruptive. Association leadership ultimately abandoned the negotiations to pursue public support for protection under civil service, and successfully lobbied for a referendum vote that was passed in 1973. Unfortunately, the struggle for civil service protection resulted in harsh feelings between city and department leaders and department personnel (L. D. Erwin, personal communication, May 22, 2007). Physical,

perceptual, and emotional barriers continued to undermine effective communications and the ability of labor and management to resolve issues.

City planners continually added services and placed greater responsibilities on department personnel without additional benefits. By 1976 the department had inaugurated emergency medical services into its operations. Staffing was accomplished with one firefighter having to fill the third position on the engine company, as well as the second position on the ambulance. The disproportionate workload further strained already divisive relationships.

In 1977 the city hired a retired Dallas assistant Chief, and National Guard Colonel, to head the department ("History of", n.d.). He was a firm believer in structure and discipline, and demanded loyalty to the department and the city. His uncompromising autocratic style of leadership did not promote interpersonal communication, but his dedication to building a superior fire department benefited most of the department's members. Through his efforts the department received better equipment, advanced training, and financial gains consistent with similar positions of responsibility in the private sector ("History of", n.d.).

By 1982 the department was better prepared for an unprecedented era of suburban population and department growth. Over the next fifteen years five new stations and 150 personnel were added by city developers. The department also added specialty teams for hazardous materials mediation, and swift water and high angle rescue. In addition, emergency medical responsibilities and technical training requirements were raised to higher standards to insure superior service to Irving's citizens. This requirement for more knowledgeable and exceptionally well trained personnel resulted in more stringent hiring requirements (K. D. Booser, personal communication, May 25, 2007).

During this time the department realized the emergence of another generation into the workforce, those born between 1960 and 1980. For many of the new applicants this was their first full-time work experience. A larger percentage of this generation had attended college or

left home at a later age. Veteran fire fighters viewed the lack of work experience as ignorance, and considered these new members as disrespectful, untrustworthy, and unwilling to fall in line with established routines. Others viewed them as rude and not having an acceptable work ethic.

This segment of the IFD workforce grew quickly due to rapid expansion and added services to the department. As their numbers increased they became more vocal about their disdain for seniority based privileges, what constituted appropriate use of sick leave and other benefits, and grew more intolerant of superior and subordinate relationships. The work environment became tense and frustrating.

When the department changed management in the early 1990's, discipline and structure were replaced with a more tolerant and open administration. Changes in city policy, civil service regulations, and the openness of fire administration provided an opportunity for younger members of the department to make significant changes in leave policy, assignment pay, duty assignments, and the workplace environment. This situation has reinforced attitudes and perceptions of impatience, avoidance of hard work, and the assumption of, "it's all about me".

As the Irving Fire Department enters the new millennium they are faced with yet another generation entering the workforce. The seriousness of not assimilating the generational shifts into a cohesive workgroup should not be understated. This department's responses to address issues in a timely manner must be based on the best information available, and result in an action that is most beneficial for the department and the citizens we serve. These objectives cannot be successfully completed without clear and concise communication. Effective communication will exist only in an environment of listening and understanding.

For three decades insufficient consideration has been given to the generational differences that influence our behavior and attitude towards others. All too often department members have assumed their perception of a situation is the same as that of the person to whom



they are speaking. This often led to a misevaluation of the problem and less than complete understanding of the action necessary to resolve an issue. When ineffective communications continue for a period of time matters may become worse, and participants may become frustrated and defensive. The unfortunate result is that individuals and smaller groups within the organization begin to work for themselves instead of the whole department. Unchecked, this practice will tend to erode trust, camaraderie, and teamwork efficiency, thus affecting department responses to address issues in a timely manner.

The executive development course was specifically designed to train executive officers to target problem areas needing adaptive change. By examining the influence of generational shifts that inhibit effective communication, groundwork for understanding communicative processes may be established to assist the department in responding appropriately and in a timely manner to emerging issues.

### Literature Review

As the diversity of generational shifts influence change efforts in an organization's workforce, change suggests uncertainty and disruption will cause personnel to have a difficult time coping with and understanding that change. Assumptions about new processes and procedures may discourage or even prevent the organization from responding to emerging issues (Pollar, & Gonzalez, 2006).

Communications breakdown is the foremost reason for organizational failure to effect change. New processes and procedures are often accompanied by misinformation, self-serving rumors, and confusion (Pollar, & Gonzalez, 2006). For an organization to enable personnel to deal with the influence of generational shifts that inhibit the communication process, they must identify the workforces' distinct generations and characteristics.

For the first time in history, employers may have as many as four distinct generations in the workforce - each with its own set of values, communication styles and attitudes about work-

life balance. They are designated as the Traditionalists or Veterans, the Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and the Millennial Generation or Nexters.

Traditionalists are considered to be the generation born from 1900 to 1945. Their lives were influenced by public figures like Joe DiMaggio, Joe McCarthy, Dr. Spock, Alfred Hitchcock, the Rat Pack, Franklin Roosevelt, Duke Ellington, Charles Lindberg, John Wayne, Bob Hope, Betty Crocker and a host of others. They found themselves in a new international role influencing global concerns while dealing with bread lines at home. Personal items were often scarce for veterans as the majority learned to do without. It was more important to save now for the unexpected later (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

The defining events for the Traditionalists' generation were World War I, the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression, World War II, and the Korean War, and shaped the God-fearing, hardworking, patriotic character of this generation. The generational personality of the Traditionalists, who lived through these events, could best be described as loyal (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

As they formed their views of the world in the shadow of harsh times and the emotional costs of overcoming them, they rebuilt the nation and its economy. They truly believed they were guaranteeing future generations an opportunity for success. Traditionalists like consistency and uniformity, things on a grand scale, are conformers, believe in logic, and are disciplined. They are also past oriented and history absorbed, believe in law and order, and are conservative spenders (Zemke et al., 2000).

Baby Boomers were born from 1946-1964, and are considered to have changed every market they entered, from the supermarket, to the job market, to the stock market. Their lives were influenced by people including, Martin Luther King, Jr., Richard Nixon, John Kennedy, Beaver Cleaver, Rosa Parks, McEnroe and Connors, the Manson family, Gloria Steinem, John Belushi, Janis Joplin, Captain Kangaroo, Captain Kirk, the Monkees, the Beatles, and the

Stones. Significant places in their lives were the Watergate hotel, the Hanoi Hotel, Chappaquiddick, and Kent State on one side, sit-ins, love-ins, *Laugh-In*, and Woodstock on the other (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

Personal things that reflected the evolution of the Boomer's identity was an exploding availability of consumer products in the marketplace – from bell bottoms and mood rings to Brooks Brothers suites and Rolex watches, from junk food to junk bonds, and from drugs to the sectors of high finance. When Boomers were asked about the greatest invention of their childhood, Lancaster and Stillman (2002) found the following:

The single most important arrival during the birth years of the Boom was television. In 1952, four million television sets could be found in American homes. By 1960, the number was *fifty* million! Gradually the generation gap between the Baby Boomers and Traditionalists widened as an entire generation of Boomers could relate to a whole set of reference points (TV shows, characters, plots, advertisers, and products) that were unknown to their parents. As they fine-tuned their sets, the Boomer's generation personality was shaped. Events that were revealed to the public through this highly visual new medium included deep, divisive issues like the war in Vietnam, Watergate, the women's and human rights movements, the OPEC oil embargo, stagflation, and recession. Experiencing these landmark events, whether live or through the miracle of television, permanently changed the Boomers (p. 21).

The generational personality for Boomers can be best described as optimistic. They believe in growth and expansion, think of themselves as stars of the show, tend to be optimistic, have learned about teamwork, and have pursued personal gratification, often at a high price to themselves and others. They have searched their souls for spiritual peace, and believed they have always been cool (Zemke et al., 2000).

The third and probably most misunderstood generation in today's workforce is the generation Xers, born from 1965-1980. They are a small but influential population that has worked to establish its own identity separate from that of the Boomers or Traditionalists. They are noted for remarkable accomplishments as managers, inventors, and entrepreneurs (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

The leading people during the Xers' formative years include the Brat Pack, Bill Clinton, Bill Gates, Monica Lewinsky, the Ayatollah Khomeini, Ted Bundy, Al Bundy, the Menendez brothers, Quentin Tarantino, Clarence Thomas, Newt Gingrich, O. J. Simpson, Dennis Rodman, Madonna, and Michael Jordan. Places of interest include the former Soviet Union, Somalia, Cannes, Chernobyl, Lockerbie, and the International Space Station (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

Xers are marked with skepticism. Through their formative years they have seen major American icons of industry, finance, and religion called into question. Divorce rates have tripled, and personal relationships are regarded with distrust. They have been inundated by the number of life-changing media, in particular the personal computer, that has sprung up during their lifetime. Violence was no longer just in the news, but close to home in the form of sexually transmitted diseases, illegal drugs, child molesters, and drunk drivers (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

The Xers' generational personality can be defined as skeptical. They are seeking a sense of family, are self-reliant, want balance, and have a nontraditional orientation about time and space. They prefer informality, have a casual approach to authority, like to live on the edge, and are technologically savvy (Zemke et al., 2000).

The newest generation entering the workforce is the Millennial Generation or Nexters. They were born from 1981 to 1999, and are considered the next baby boom. They are smart,

practical, and techno-savvy, but it is difficult to know what a generation will be capable of in the board room when they are new to the workforce.

With technology and the media obscuring the separation of fantasy and reality, the people that influence the Nexters have often appeared larger than life. They have included such personalities as Prince Charles, Chelsea Clinton, Tinky Winky, Ricky Martin, Claire Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio. Places of interest have been both real and virtual, ranging from chat rooms to *Dawson's Creek*, from *90210* to Oklahoma City, and from cyberspace to outer space. Nexters have always had access to cell phones, pagers and personal computers. They have visited virtually the entire globe through the internet, and have world wide information being updated minute-by-minute. Nexters are realistic about the challenges of modern life, and have been directly affected by personal threats stemming from violent outbreaks (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

The Nexters' generational personality can be defined as realistic. They are concerned about personal safety, have the passion to take on violence as a cause, are very savvy, and streetwise. They also have a more casual acceptance of multiculturalism, are more tolerant, and seem eager to embrace to a stricter moral code. Nexters tend to be consumer oriented, adaptable and pragmatic, and view others as special and unique. Unfortunately, postmodernism has influenced them to believe that nothing is more important than their own personal reactions. They are stressed by the current financial and social environment, and tend to be intellectually disengaged and easily bored (Zemke et al., 2000).

In addition to generational personalities, elements of generational shifts affecting communication include core values and on the job assets and liabilities. Core values and job related ethics based on shared experiences during the formative years, tend to be similar along generational boundaries (Notter, 2007a).

Traditionalists are most often defined by strong family ties and dedication to religion. Higher education was considered a luxury, and leisure time was earned from hard work. Adversity has pre-conditioned them to be uncomfortable with change, and has resulted in a focus on stability. Their core values are dedication, sacrifice, hard work, conformity, and respect for authority. They are patient, place duty before pleasure, and adhere to organizational rules. On the job they are stable, detail oriented, thorough, loyal and hard working. However, they are inept with ambiguity and change, reluctant to buck the system, uncomfortable with conflict, and reticent when they disagree with others (Notter, 2007b; Zemke et al., 2000).

Baby Boomers are considered as self-absorbed. Individual accomplishments and hard work are more for the benefit of the individual than the company. Family stability was in transition, and education was seen as a right not a privilege. Boomers grew out of a time of prosperity into an era of social unrest. Their core values are optimism, team orientation, personal gratification, health and wellness, personal growth, work, and involvement. On the job they are service oriented, driven, willing to go the extra mile, good at relationships, desire to please, and are good team players. Job liabilities include not being budget minded, uncomfortable with conflict, reluctant to go against peers, may put process ahead of result, are overly sensitive to feedback, and judgmental and self-centered (Notter, 2007b; Zemke et al., 2000).

Generation X or Xers are primarily known for entering the workforce after the onslaught of corporate downsizing. Company loyalty gave way to an entrepreneurial spirit that changed the work/life balance from their parents live to work, to this generation's balance of work to live. Xers are often children of divorced parents and view change as the norm rather than an exception. Their core values include diversity, global thinking, balance, techno-literacy, having fun, informality, self-reliance, and pragmatism. On the job they are adaptable,

independent, techno-literate, unintimidated by authority, and creative. Job liabilities include impatience, poor people skills, inexperience, and cynicism (Notter, 2007b; Zemke et al., 2000).

Society is still learning about the Millennials or Nexters. They were raised on the internet and are technologically advanced. Their perspective is more global, informed, and time sensitive. Nexters are generally considered more flexible, and are more comfortable with change and diversity. Their core values are optimism, civic duty, confidence, achievement, sociability, morality, street smarts, and diversity. On the job assets include collective action, optimism, tenacity, a heroic spirit, multitasking capabilities, and technological savvy. Their liabilities include a need for supervision and structure, and inexperience, particularly with handling difficult people issues (Notter, 2007b; Zemke et al., 2000).

These generational personalities, core values, and on the job assets and liabilities are the primary foundations of each generation's behavioral and communicative norms. The differences in generational norms go well beyond mere life stages, and are based on broad variations in personal values learned during the contrasting environment and social climate experienced by each generation (Notter, 2007c).

When discussing issues related to differences in generational norms, heated debate often ensues. Participants often fail to see the source of increasing conflict as a significant difference in norms, beliefs, values, and historical generational influences. Thus they fail to realize the diversity factors that are driving the intergenerational conflict, and ultimately the breakdown in communication (Lahiri, 2007).

Another important factor to consider as to the effect of generational norms on communications is:

Over the last ten years, globalization and technology have created a business environment of high risk, erratic markets, and unpredictable resource-needs. To remain viable, employers have been forced to adopt extremely flexible and efficient staffing

practices. In turn, employees have adjusted by adopting more aggressive attitudes, expectations, and behaviors. Average employees feel challenged to take care of themselves and their families; they struggle to balance desires for long-term security with short-term needs for opportunities, work-conditions, recognition, and rewards.

The downturn in the economy has further entrenched these responses, not weakened them. As a result, the values and norms that first appeared among Generation X are steadily supplanting more traditional workplace values and norms (Tulgan, 2007). These factors tend to facilitate self-focus. The more self-focused individuals become, the less likely they are to actively participate in continuous conversations that lead to better decisions (Notter, 2007c).

These differences in generational personalities, core values, and on the job assets and liabilities will determine how personnel's practices impact their communication. Garner (2007) describes seven tangible and intangible practices that inhibit effective communication.

First, research has determined that an important factor in building effective communications is close proximity. As participants become dissatisfied with the scope of their communications they establish physical barriers to distance themselves from the frustration. These include establishing territories, closing office doors, and physically separating personnel from one another.

Second, personnel tend to rely on their perception of a situation, and fail to actively listen to all input. This often results in each participant in a communication merely repeating their position on a given topic, stifling the ability to move forward.

Third, individuals' emotions, comprised mainly of fear, mistrust, and suspicion, force them into a vulnerability that can stunt their development as an effective communicator. Fear of what others might think of us is a strong deterrent to openness.



Fourth, cultural differences can make it difficult to engage in active communication if participation is dependant upon adopting the behavioral patterns of others. Non- compliance may result in barriers to acceptance, and a high level of game-playing replaces good communication.

Fifth, language that utilizes unfamiliar expressions, buzz-words, and jargon to describe what we want to say in our own terms, may present barriers to others. When communication is cloaked in such a manner, it is a way of excluding others.

Sixth, gender differences in speech patterns may result in inhibiting effective exchange. Men tend to speak in a linear, logical and compartmentalized manner, where as women speak more freely mixing logic and emotion.

Seventh, there are six levels of interpersonal barriers at which people can distance themselves from one another:

1. Withdrawal is an absence of interpersonal contact and a refusal to be in touch.
2. Rituals are meaningless repetitive activities designed to disengage from others.
3. Pastimes are social activities to fulfill time without constructive interaction.
4. Working activities that meet minimum requirements of contact but no more.
5. Games are subtle, manipulative interactions to establish winners and losers.
6. Closeness is refusing to deal with interpersonal contact when there is a high expectation of honesty and acceptance of yourself and others.

In addition, Heathfield (2007) observes that human beings are sensitive to body language, facial expression, posture, movement, and tone of voice. Effective communication can be inhibited when these interpersonal communication dynamics are incongruent with a person's words. Without total awareness of the communicator, a person could miss a great deal of what is being communicated.

The literary review has identified the generations in today's workforce, their generalized personalities, core values, and job attributes and liabilities. It has also provided valuable insight as to the influence norms of behavior and how individual practices may negatively influence communication.

### Procedures

In identifying the fundamental differences that exist between the four generations, it became important to understand the influence that the fire service itself has on its personnel's norms and practices. With this in mind, I began my research by reviewing the department's employment records to obtain the number of employees, employment dates, and birth dates. Based on their year of birth, employees were identified and segmented by generational association as follows; prior to 1946, Traditionalists, 1946-1964, Baby Boomers, 1965-1980, Xers, and after 1980, Nexters (C. A. Britland, personal communication, June 4, 2007).

After determining the relative population of each generation within the IFD, volunteers were administered a questionnaire (appendix A). The purpose of this instrument was to identify similarities or distinct differences between IFD members' personalities and norms, and researched generalized personalities and norms. The questionnaire was developed using the generalized generational personalities and norms identified by Zemke, et al (2000), and Lancaster and Stillman (2002).

The survey sample size was determined by using a margin of error factor that would be no more than 5 percent greater than the inherent error factor of the entire population. Using the error in a sample formula of 1 divided by the square root of the number of people in the sample (Niles, 2007), I found that the entire population of 297 personnel had an inherent margin of error of 5.8 percent. Therefore I selected a minimum sample size of 90 participants which gave me a 4.7 percent margin of error in relation to the entire population. I also required a minimum of 20 percent of each generation's population to be included in the sample. To meet the desired

criteria, 92 questionnaires were administered to on-duty personnel at their stations from June 15, through June 25, 2007.

After reviewing the questionnaires, I conducted personal observations of station personnel to identify the similarities or differences in observed and researched norms, work ethics and personal communications behaviors. These activities were observed to determine which behaviors inhibit communications and the department's responses to address current issues.

The subjects of the observations were observed during 24 hour shift duty at Irving Fire Stations 2, 6, and 7 for two consecutive 30 day periods beginning July 1, 2007, and ending August 29, 2007. During the first period subjects were observed without interruption or direction. During the second period subjects were influenced to discuss how they felt about changes in benefits and policies, the work ethics of different generations, interpersonal communication, and IFD administrator's responses to address issues in a timely manner. Both observation periods were conducted without participants' knowledge of the process.

Observations were recorded on worksheets (appendix B) using the following four criteria; (1) generalized generational personality norms, (2) work ethic, (3) practiced barriers to communication, and (4) ability to resolve an issue and take action. The observed subjects included one traditionalist, three Baby Boomers, three Xers, and two Nexters. These observations were conducted to identify the generational norms and the practices of IFD members, whose influence inhibits communications and the department's ability to respond to issues in a timely manner.

To support the observations, I interviewed Russel Wilson, Assistant Chief of Operations, on Monday, September 10, 2007, at 10:25am in his office at Fire Administration, Grant Blake, President, Irving Professional Fire Fighters Association, on Sunday, September 9, 2007, at 12:18pm in the Captain's office at station 7, and Rick Deordio, Human Resources, on

Wednesday, September 12, 2007, at 8:00am in his office at Irving City Hall. These individuals were selected because of their continuing interaction with department personnel and problem-solving experience. The interviewees were asked five questions (Appendix C) that were designed to focus their attention to significant on-going problems, and what influence inhibited communications and disruptive behaviors have on the department's responses to address issues in a timely manner.

The data recorded from the methods used in this research was consistent with the goals of the research and provided substantial information to answer the research questions

## RESULTS

Review of the department's employment records received from the executive secretary substantiated the following generational segments: Traditionalists, 8 personnel or 2.6% of the population; Baby Boomers, 179 personnel or 58.7% of the population; Xers, 100 personnel or 32.8% of the population; and Nexters, 18 personnel or 5.9% of the population.

To satisfy the questionnaire's margin of error and the minimum number of responses from each generational segment criteria, a minimum of 2 Traditionalists, 36 Baby Boomers, 20 Xers, and 4 Nexters responses were required. 92 questionnaires were completed and included responses from 2 Traditionalists, 46 Baby Boomers, 35 Xers, and 9 Nexters. The total number of responses to each question is notated in parentheses after each answer (Appendix A).

Results indicate that Traditionalists' attributes are generally held as disciplined, hard-working and conforming, while Baby Boomers are dedicated, team oriented and optimistic. Xers are perceived to be technologically savvy, to live on the edge, and be self-reliant, whereas Nexters are considered tolerant, realistic, and live according to a stronger moral code.

In contrast, Traditionalists' are negatively viewed as dictatorial, rigid and technologically challenged; Baby Boomers are seen as self-righteous, self-absorbed, and

pretentious; Xers are most commonly seen as slackers, impatient, and sullen; and Nexters are most often referred to as undisciplined, pampered and self-absorbed.

When considering the one word that most accurately describes each generation, Traditionalists are described as loyal, Baby Boomers as optimistic, Xers as skeptical, and Nexters as realistic. In addition, Traditionalists were found to be the easiest to communicate with, while communications with Baby Boomers and Nexters were generally considered not difficult. In contrast, most responses considered communications with Xers to be more difficult.

With regard to the preceding summaries, two trends emerged while recording participant's responses. First, each generation's responses to questions concerning themselves were answered with more positive and fewer negative descriptions. Second, Baby Boomers and Xers were considerably harsher with negative responses for each other's generation.

When considering the negative physical and emotional responses to emphasize their dissatisfaction with communications, Traditionalists are most often observed to change the subject, use disinterested body language and delayed responses to ignore the speaker, dramatize or lecture how it used to be, or simply patronize the speaker to have them disengage. In contrast, Baby Boomers and Xers are characterized by raising their voices; assuming a defiant stance or body language, using profanity, making a joke of the situation, or finding others to support their position. Xers are also believed to simply walk away from or ignore a speaker and to be sarcastic. Nexters are believed to withdraw or not participate in conversations, act unaware, simply shrug off a difficult situation, or use unfamiliar jargon to disrupt communication.

In the last section of the questionnaire, the majority of the department's membership believe that responses to department issues are untimely and do not resolve issues satisfactorily.

Inhibited communications is strongly considered as a factor in the department's difficulty in responding to issues in a timely manner.

After completing the questionnaires, behavioral information collected from the personal observations was used to identify the similarities or differences in expected behaviors. The first consideration was how well had the generalized generational norms been identified.

I found the Traditionalist to be most closely associated with expected behavior. This subject was consistent in his view and performance, hard working, and logical in determining alternatives to accomplishing goals. They believed that a lack of discipline was a primary source of inconsistency, and they were less conforming to changes in daily routines. The eldest Baby Boomer most closely related to the Traditionalists' norms, while the two other subjects were generally consistent in regards to teamwork, dedication, and optimism about the growth of the department and the expansion of services. However, they both were mildly defiant to being given orders.

The most notable similarities with Xers were their technological expertise and self reliance. Xers have a definite informality and casualness to authority and rank structure, and are time sensitive to the work invested versus reward received. Xers tended to gravitate more to Nexters as a result of their technologically enriched educations and active life styles. Nexters demonstrated significantly more patience and consideration, and appeared more realistic as to probable outcomes to different situations. The Nexters proved to be the most difficult to communicate with due to significantly different interests.

The second consideration was each generation's work ethic. I observed the Traditionalist and the Baby Boomers to be hard working and more willing to share the workload until all objectives were completed. They were self-motivated and required little instruction. In contrast, Xers, although efficient and thorough, tended to segregate their responsibilities. When their respective assignments were completed they often did not offer to

help others. They showed little interest in other fire related activities in preference to playing computer games, television, and personal projects. Nexters, although thorough, were reluctant to initiate work activity. They appeared unsure, unknowledgeable, and somewhat intimidated by their surroundings.

The third consideration was each generation's negative behavior that inhibited communications. The Traditionalist often became overly expressive. They established perceptual and emotional barriers that regarded others as not worthy or sufficiently knowledgeable to participate in certain discussions. Baby Boomers engaged in similar barriers as well as cultural barriers. In this incidence cultural barriers relate to being excluded from traditional fire fighting acts of recognition, approval, and rights of inclusion. Xers tended to foster more interpersonal barriers by withdrawing from discussions, engaging in other activities, and utilizing gamesmanship to manipulate interactions. Nexters tended to remove themselves from the area and retreat to a safe place such as their dorm, study area, or apparatus room. All four generations use language barriers to the extent of raised voices, buzz-words and generational jargon, foreign language, and profanity.

The final consideration was the ability to resolve issues and take action. Dealing with the differences in background, education, experience, and communications barriers, it was often difficult to come to a suitable solution without someone feeling that they were unrepresented. Often personnel felt that joint decisions were made in the best interests of the officers, both Baby Boomers, regardless of how democratic a decision making process was administered. When decisions were difficult to accept, action was often delayed until members were able to fully understand all the parameters and considerations that went into the decisions. Even then it was apparent that a significant length of time was needed for personnel to conform.

After completing the observations I conducted three interviews to supplement the information on the similarities or differences in behavioral norms identified in my observations. The interviewees were: Assistant Chief, Operations, Russell Wilson, September 10, 2007; Association President, Grant Blake, September 9, 2007; and Rick Deordio, Human Resources, September 12, 2007.

A consensus of the interviews determined that the five most significant problems that have been identified as a result of generational shifts are cultural diversity, changes in work ethics, attitudes and value systems, and individual expectations. These areas of concern have inhibited communications across all generational segments.

Cultural diversity has affected communications through language barriers including buzz-words and jargon, religious involvement, and educational backgrounds evolving from mechanical to technological. Changes in work ethics have caused hard-working Traditionalists and dedicated Baby Boomers who live to work, to become disillusioned with entitlement driven technologically dependent Xers and Nexters who work to live. Attitudes have changed from a sense of duty and conformity to a causal approach to authority and focus on self-satisfaction.

Values and individual expectations have undergone a gauntlet of societal change from loyalty and dedication of the Traditionalists, to personal gratification and wellness of the Baby Boomers. Xers have utilized their freelance spirit to embrace diversity and global thinking, and Nexters have fostered a renewed optimism, sense of civic duty, and a willingness to accept multiculturalism. Societal pressure on value systems has governed interpersonal interaction to the extent that conduct once considered meaningless horseplay, is now considered harassment and possibly illegal. With such extremes in personal visions and expectations and the failure to acknowledge each generation's experience and knowledge, interpersonal communication has often been inhibited to a point where conflict often results.



The behavioral norms for Traditionalist that are most influential in inhibiting communications directly correspond to their hard-line work ethic. They often feel that work policies should not be challenged, and therefore are reluctant to change. Their insistence on conformity makes them rigid and appear set in their ways.

For Baby Boomers, the behavioral norms that are most influential in inhibiting communications primarily stem from their willingness to sacrifice relationships in order to succeed. Their constant questioning of why things are done in a specific way often forces change deemed unnecessary.

Xers' behavioral norms that are most influential in inhibiting communications are those that demonstrate a casual approach to authority, and lack of respect for experience and tradition. Their right of entitlement and lack of social skills gives the appearance of a generation unwilling to earn their rewards. They are impatient and demanding.

Nexters' behavioral norms that are most influential in inhibiting communications are demonstrated by their lack of discipline and dependence on technology. They are unwilling to accept responsibility to learn from experience. They do not have adequate social or language skills to engage in interesting and meaningful conversation.

When behavioral norms negatively impact personal interactions department personnel often engage in disruptive practices to emphasize their dissatisfaction. The more common practices included changing the subject, raising their voices, displaying annoyed or intimidating body language, or becoming defiant. Negative responses also included overt criticism, profanity, work slow-downs, ignoring the situation or complete withdrawal from the area. These situations have made some personnel feel misunderstood, disassociated, and skeptical as to whether or not their input will be considered in decision making processes.

Generational differences in norms, value systems, and methods of communication have at times complicated the decision making process. Time consuming deliberations to consider

the impact of a decision on each generational segment quite often does not guarantee an accepted solution. Frequently, addressed issues not completely resolved unveil additional mitigating concerns that need attention.

Decisions made utilizing input from several sources that are not known to all participants often contribute to those concerns. Without a complete understanding of all the input it has been difficult for some personnel to accept a compromise solution. These situations have in part caused delayed responses to department issues resulting in frustration and apprehension among IFD personnel.

### Discussion

After examining the historical record (“History of”, n.d.) and employment data supplied by the executive secretary (C. A. Britland, personal communication, June 4, 2007), I found that the Irving Fire department has undergone tremendous cultural diversity, educational, technological, and staffing changes. These changes occurred as a result of scientific and technological advances, social awareness, increased population density, expansion of the department and its services, and aging of the department’s workforce. As a result, generational shifts have expanding from a two generation to four generation workforce. Pollar and Gonzalez (2006) revealed that the diversity of generational shifts will influence change within an organization, and that change in and of itself will cause uncertainly and disruption.

By identifying the generalized personalities of each generation, Lancaster and Stillman (2002), and Zemke et al.(2000), laid a foundation enabling this researcher to identify those elements that inhibit communications, thus affect the department’s ability to address issues in a timely manner.

Results from the questionnaire and observations of on-duty personnel supported the generalized personalities that Traditionalists are consistent, conforming, logical, disciplined, and hard working. Baby Boomers are optimistic, teamwork oriented, dedicated, and believes

that growth and expansion are avenues to success. Xers are self reliant, technologically savvy, and enjoy living on the edge. Nexters are realistic, tolerant, considerate, and live by a stronger moral code.

In addition to these generalized personalities, elements of generational shifts found to affect communication include core values and on the job assets and liabilities. Notter (2007a) cited that core values and job related ethics are based on shared experiences during the formative years, and tend to be similar along generational boundaries.

Results from the questionnaire and observational studies strongly supported the core values and job assets and liabilities of each generation cited by Notter (2007b), and Zemke et al., (2000), with three notable exceptions. First, the older Baby Boomer observed was more closely aligned with the Traditionalist's generalized personality, core values, and work ethic. Second, the Xers were considerably more resistant to and disrespectful of authority, and were less adaptable to changing work conditions than expected. Third, the Nexters' reliance on quick access to information severely limited their decision making ability in the field, thus hampering their flexibility.

After determining the generational shifts that have occurred in the IFD, I identified elements of those generational shifts, (generalized personalities, core values, and work assets and liabilities), affecting communication in the IFD. I was then able to identify the negative affects that generational norms may have on effective communication, and how department members' practices impact that communication.

Lahiri (2007) stated that when discussing issues related to differences in generational norms, heated debate often ensues. I found this to be particularly relevant in the observation studies when members discussed how station activities would be conducted. The older members continued to rely on traditional methods and strict interpretation of the rules, while the younger members tried to force a more flexible solution. As each side more aggressively

tried to enforce their viewpoint, communications deteriorated to a point where the subject of the debate was completely disregarded and the focus changed to who had more rights.

This type of process leads to more and more dissatisfaction, and often results in attempts to change the workplace environment to suit personal needs rather than the needs of the group. The breakdown in communications supports the Notter (2007c) observation that the more self-focused individuals become, the less likely they are to actively participate in continuous conversations that lead to better decisions.

The observation studies did reveal numerous examples of cooperation and consideration among the members on duty. They were however, closely related to situations where all members had a common stake such as benefit packages, vacation leave, and recruit training. When difficult exchanges were encountered, members reacted with behaviors influenced by differences in generational personalities, core values, and on the job assets and liabilities. Garner (2007), stated that these influences will determine how personnel's practices impact their communication. These practices include territorial, perceptual, emotional, cultural, language, gender, and interpersonal barriers. Heathfield (2007) also observed that human beings are sensitive to body language.

Results from the questionnaires and observation studies confirmed the existence of these practices. Personnel used their position of authority or seniority to impose their will, engaged in work slow-downs, used intimidating speech and body language, and on occasion appeared openly defiant in conforming to the groups' position. More personally directed practices used mockery, joking, and profanity. Another tactic was separation from the discussion by ignoring or changing the subject or completely withdrawing from the area to emphasize their position.

Information compiled from personal interviews with Russel Wilson (personal communication, September, 2007) Grant Blake (personal communication, September, 2007),

and Rick Deordio (personal communication, September, 2007), supported the existence of these practices. Their supervisory involvement in interpersonal relationships and problem solving experiences has led to a consensus that resolving issues has become more time consuming and difficult. Decisions that consider the personalities, core values, and work ethic of each generation, and that are required to break through their behavioral barriers often do not assimilate complete and accurate information to accommodate all four generations. This situation has made the responses to issues less sensitive to individual or specific needs, and often raises additional questions or issues to be resolved.

This study has identified and described four generations that function within the Irving Fire Department. The elements of generational shifts affecting communications are directly related to each generations generalized personalities, their core values, and their work ethic as a function of their job related assets and liabilities. The affects of these generational norms have often had negative impact on communications, and have been emphasized by department members' practices used to disrupt on-going processes. The result has been that the department responses to address issues in a timely manner have been significantly impeded.

### Recommendations

Fundamental personality, core value, and work ethic differences exist between the four generations of the Irving Fire department. To fully understand the impact of their respective beliefs and behaviors, the department must be pro-active in establishing organizational and personal development programs designed to bridge the generational differences. With a more complete realization of why and how individuals interact based on their cultural background, education, values and beliefs, and expectations, greater consideration may be given in dealing with difficult situations.

Executive officers must encourage on-going dissemination of information from decision making processes to support the well-being of interpersonal interactions. Facing mass

retirements of the remaining Traditionalists and older Baby Boomers, time, consideration, and understanding of each generation's motivations are essential in establishing a learning environment that will prepare Xers and Nexters for leadership positions. Administration should be encouraged to stimulate awareness, promote education, listen to opposing viewpoints, and establish a work environment that fosters respect and understanding.

Department members that have the freedom to complete their responsibilities based on results free of undue pressure, criticism, or stereotyping, will ultimately perform more consistently and enthusiastically. By giving department members the tools to understand and develop, and by encouraging them to be a part on the decision-making process, executive officers may foster a workplace environment that is more compatible with such a diverse workforce.

Developmental processes can be accomplished with on-line training, company level interaction such as focus group discussions, and with multi-company instruction and interactive scenarios conducted by industry professionals.

Researchers who may wish to continue part or all of this study should consider segmenting each generation's relation to each other on a one-to-one basis. The volume of information to be processed when considering four generations at one time is monumental. It is imperative to educate yourself and understand your own personality, core values and ethics when dealing with others.

Additional research detailing specific action plans should prove beneficial to smaller departments without the financial resources to hire consultants or professional trainers. Ultimately, any change must be at a pace that department members can assimilate without additional stress.

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## Appendix A

Generational Studies Questionnaire: Date \_\_\_\_\_ Shift \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_

The Irving Fire Department is a dynamic organization with four generations contributing to a diverse workforce. Below are several questions regarding your insights to the personal attributes of each generation. Please take enough time to understand and accurately record your answer to each question.

1. What is your generational affiliation?
 

a. Traditional (2)	b. Baby Boomer (46)
c. Generation X (Xers) (35)	d. Next Generation (Nexters) (9)
  
2. What are the Traditionalists best attributes? (Check all that apply)
 

a. Consistent (51)	b. Conforming (42)
c. Logical (19)	d. Disciplined (62)
e. Hard working (55)	f. None of the above (0)
g. Other <u>Church Members (5), Group Associations (3)</u>	
  
3. What are the Baby Boomers best attributes? (Check all that apply)
 

a. Believe in growth/expansion (23)	b. Optimistic (36)
c. Teamwork oriented (48)	d. Spiritual (29)
e. Dedicated (71)	f. None of the above (1)
g. Other <u>Strong work ethic (2),</u>	
  
4. What are the Xers best attributes? (Check all that apply)
 

a. Sense of family (2)	b. Self-Reliant (51)
c. Balanced (14)	d. Live on the edge (63)
e. Technologically savvy (82)	f. None of the above (0)
g. Other <u>(none)</u>	
  
5. What are the Nexters best attributes? (Check all that apply)
 

a. Realistic (55)	b. Tolerant (63)
c. Stricter moral code (27)	d. Fiscally aware (0)
e. Considerate (27)	f. None of the above (0)
g. Other <u>Reserved (5), Polite (7)</u>	
  
6. What are the Traditionalists worst attributes? (Check all that apply)
 

a. Dictatorial (86)	b. Rigid (57)
c. Inhibited (9)	d. Technologically challenged (44)
e. Control too many assets (3)	f. None of the above (0)
g. Other <u>Stubborn (2)</u>	
  
7. What are the Baby Boomers worst attributes? (Check all that apply)
 

a. Too open (1)	b. Self-absorbed (67)
c. Self-righteous (69)	d. Workaholics (31)
e. Pretentious (42)	f. None of the above (0)
g. Other <u>Bossy (5), Critical (2)</u>	
  
8. What are the Xers worst attributes? (Check all that apply)
 

a. Uneducated (2)	b. Disrespectful (12)
c. Slackers (67)	d. Impatient (59)
e. Sullen (26)	f. None of the above (0)
g. Other <u>Unknowledgeable (7)</u>	

9. What are the Nexters worst attributes? (Check all that apply)
- a. Pampered (67) b. Undisciplined (69)
  - c. Uncreative (24) d. Self-absorbed (65)
  - e. Technologically reliant (77) f. None of the above (0)
  - g. Other easily distracted (3), easily bored (5)
10. What one word most accurately described the Traditional generation?
- a. Optimistic (8) b. Skeptical (4) c. Realistic (21) d. Loyal (58) e. Other Comfortable (1)
11. What one word most accurately described the Baby Boomer generation?
- a. Realistic (9) b. loyal (11) c. Optimistic (58) d. Skeptical (3) e. Other: workaholics (7)
12. What one word most accurately described the Xers' generation?
- a. Optimistic (12) b. Realistic (3) c. Loyal (0) d. Skeptical (70) e. Other Cautious (7)
13. What one word most accurately described the Nexters' generation?
- a. Loyal (11) b. Skeptical (14) c. Realistic (32) d. Optimistic (34) e. Other Selfish (1), worthless (1)
14. How difficult is it to communicate with Traditionalists?
- Very Difficult 1 (0) 2 (3) 3 (36) 4 (29) 5 (24) Not Difficult
15. How difficult is it to communicate with Baby Boomers?
- Very Difficult 1 (0) 2 (7) 3 (41) 4 (27) 5 (17) Not Difficult
16. How difficult is it to communicate with Xers?
- Very Difficult 1 (5) 2 (16) 3 (40) 4 (18) 5 (3) Not Difficult
17. How difficult is it to communicate with Nexters?
- Very Difficult 1 (1) 2 (4) 3 (55) 4 (31) 5 (11) Not Difficult
18. What negative physical or emotional response do Traditionalists use to emphasize their communications?
- Change the subject, fold their arms and ignore you, dramatize how it used to be, patronize
19. What negative physical or emotional response do Baby Boomers use to emphasize their communications?
- Raise their voice, defiant stance/posture, use profanity, joke around, and find others for support
20. What negative physical or emotional response do Xers use to emphasize their communications?
- Raise their voice, defiant speech/posture, tend to walk away, ignore the issue/speaker
21. What negative physical or emotional response do Nexters use to emphasize their communications?
- Withdraw/no participation, act unaware, shrug it off, become sullen/hurt, and speak in unfamiliar jargon
22. Are department responses to address issues done in a timely manner?
- Timely 1(3) 2 (3) 3 (17) 4 (54) 5 (17) Untimely
23. Are timely responses to address department issues inhibited by ineffective communication?
- Inhibited 1 (6) 2 (26) 3 (40) 4 (14) 5 (6) Uninhibited
24. Do IFD responses to department issues effectively resolve those issues for the majority of the department's members?
- Unresolved 1 (14) 2 (21) 3 (51) 4 (4) 5 (2) Resolved

## Appendix B

## Generational Studies Observation Form

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Member Observed: \_\_\_\_\_ Generational Affiliation \_\_\_\_\_

## 1. Generalized personality norms: (Summary of observations)

Traditionalist: Consistent, hard working, logical / Disciplinarian, non- conforming  
 Baby Boomer 1: Consistent, hard-working, conforming / Less sociable, demonstrative  
 Baby Boomer 2: Dedicated, goal oriented / Eruptive behavior, self-centered  
 Baby Boomer 3: Teamwork oriented, dedicated, optimistic / defiant, disrespectful  
 Xer 1: Technologically savvy, self-reliant / Anti-authority, distracted  
 Xer 2: Conscientious, self-reliant, dedicated / Anti-authority, reactive  
 Nexter 1: Patient, respectful, technologically savvy / difficult to communicate with  
 Nexter 2: Respectful, technologically savvy, / difficult to communicate with

## 2. Work Ethic: (Summary of observations)

Traditionalist: Loyal, demanding, job-centered, willing to share the workload  
 Baby Boomer 1: Self-motivated, mechanical savvy, quality driven, teamwork  
 Baby Boomer 2: Hard working but unmotivated, required little instruction  
 Baby Boomer 3: Self-motivated, team oriented, works to completion  
 Xer 1: Efficient, works smart, thorough, low initiative to do additional tasks  
 Xer 2: Efficient, smart, thorough, little regard for other fire related activities  
 Nexter 1: Focused but reluctant, unsure and intimidated  
 Nexter 2: Focused although unknowledgeable, reluctant to initiate work activity

## 3. Practiced Barriers to communication: (Summary of observations)

Traditionalist: Authoritative by rank, often treated others as unknowledgeable, harsh tone  
 Baby Boomer 1: Withholds recognition, ignores those not deemed worthy  
 Baby Boomer 2: Over embellishes, aggressive responses, exclusion, withdrawal, profanity  
 Baby Boomer 3: Ignoring, treating others as non-equals, exclusion, aggression, harsh tone  
 Xer 1: Aggression, changing the subject or activity, gamesmanship, disrespect  
 Xer 2: Walks away, interrupts, name calling, gamesmanship  
 Nexter 1: Leaves the area, engages in other activities, speaks in generational jargon  
 Nexter 2: Withdraws from conversation, refuses to engage in conversation

## 4. Ability to resolve issues and take action: (Summary of observations)

Traditionalist: Usually has the determining solution due to authority/responsibility  
 Baby Boomer 1: Has some difficulty despite excellent qualities, perceived as passive  
 Baby Boomer 2: Often feels disregarded, process undemocratic,  
 Baby Boomer 3: Forceful presence, hard negotiator, will go it alone  
 Xer 1: Often does well in communications, calm, resourceful path to solutions  
 Xer 2: Exceptionally bright but reluctant to respond, feels unrepresented  
 Nexter 1: Has little or no decision making power, lack of experience/seniority  
 Nexter 2: Has little or no decision making power, lack of experience/seniority

## Appendix C

## Generational Studies Interview Questions

(Summary of responses from taped interviews)

- A. Since the 1960's, the Irving Fire Department has changed from a two generation workforce to a four generation work force. What are the most significant problem areas you have identified as a result of the generational shifts in the IFD workforce?

Blake: Commonality (diversity), education, practices (work ethic), expectations, values.

Wilson: Work ethic, attitude, response to authority, education, values

Deordio: Education, less respect for experience or chain of command, cultural values.

- B. Do the problems you identified negatively influence communications? If so, how?

Blake: Individuals tend to scrutinize different value systems, educational backgrounds, and work ethics, and then let personal attitudes interfere and create prejudice.

Wilson: Questioning differences in backgrounds and personal preferences often leads to questioning the authority and reason to make a decision, thus isolating individuals and causing breakdowns in communication.

Diordio: Narrow-mindedness and resistance to authority often create hostility leading to misunderstanding the facts. This crates an atmosphere of mistrust, confusion, and doubt.

- C. Which behavioral norms of Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Xers and Nexters are the most influential when considering factors that inhibit effective communications?

Traditionalists: value-system, work ethic, life training and experience vs. textbook, head of household mentality. Boomers: Self absorption with personal success. Xers: resistance to authority, pursuing their own ideas, and having less sense of obligation to others or the department. Nexters: dependency on technology, inexperience and naivety.

- D. What practices have you observed when department members become dissatisfied or frustrated with interpersonal communications?

Using position to impose will, work slow-downs, intimidating speech and body language, defiance, mockery, profanity, separation or complete withdrawal, shift in emphasis, taking an I win position, raised voices, and retaliation.

- E. How have inhibited communications affected the IFD's ability to address or respond to issues in a timely manner?

The additional consideration required to break through barriers and assimilate complete and accurate information to accommodate four generations, has made the decision making process more time consuming, more difficult, and less responsive to specific needs.